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The Mahdi and Jesus as Allies against al-Dajjal (the Antichrist)

In Islamic eschatological literature, there are several important figures. Perhaps the most important of these are Jesus, the Antichrist, and the Mahdi. These three figures are closely related. Although a book could be written about any of these three individually, our focus is Jesus, so it is appropriate to discuss Jesus's relationship with the other two figures. Since the idea of the Mahdi has an especial importance in the Shi'ite tradition, I found it useful to include the Shi'ite theological perspective on Jesus's return in this chapter.

The Mahdi

The Mahdi is an Islamic messianic figure whose emergence at the end of time is expected to bring justice to the world. He is portrayed as a human being who has the extraordinary power to make such a change. Although the Mahdi is not named in the Qur'an or the highly reliable Hadith anthologies of al-Bukhari and Muslim, belief in the coming of the Mahdi is found both in the Sunni and Shi'ite traditions of Islam.[1] The belief in the emergence of the Mahdi is an essential part of the Shi'ite tradition and doctrines in that tradition regarding his coming and messianic role are considerably different than those found in the Sunni tradition. Although the vast majority of Sunnis believe in the coming of the Mahdi, the figure is not a major part of their theology; that is to say, a belief in the coming of the Mahdi is not one of the pillars of Sunni Islam or its articles of faith.[2] The major role of the Mahdi in the Sunni tradition is to work for justice and to fight with Jesus against the Antichrist and eventually defeat him. In "al-Anbiya'," or "the Prophets," a chapter of Muhammad al-Bukhari's al-Sahih, we are taught about a nameless figure who leads a prayer at the request of Jesus. Many commentators on this hadith believe this Muslim leader to be the Mahdi.

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Some hadith even suggest that Jesus will meet with the Mahdi at the time of a specific prayer. One hadith says this meeting will take place at a morning prayer while another says it will be during an afternoon prayer. It is believed that Jesus and the Mahdi will pray together but that the leader in prayer will be the Mahdi. Despite the fact that Jesus is among the five elite prophets of God and the Mahdi is lower in spiritual rank than Jesus, some traditions suggest that Jesus will ask the Mahdi to lead the prayer.

Some Muslim commentators take Hadith literature on the Mahdi very literally while other prominent scholars understand the hadith on the subject in allegorical ways. Still other scholars deny that the idea of the Mahdi is found in Islam. For example, Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935), a prominent Egyptian scholar and jurist, argues that neither in the Qur'an nor in the Hadith can one find a reliable reference to the idea of the Mahdi that would support the figure's role in Sunni theology. He warns Muslims of pseudo-Mahdis. In concluding his arguments, he says: "We do not believe in this expected personality. We believe in the harm of believing in him." He also believes that the reason for Muslims' stagnation in technology and military power is their belief in a man with an extraordinary "unseen power and heavenly support," a capacity that can make things right and miraculously bring about justice.[3] It seems that Rida's idea is not the dominant view among Muslims, but his view is shared by a good number of Muslim intellectuals.

There is no doubt that Muslims' expectations for the Mahdi reflect a deep-rooted desire for a just social order and a moral system of governance. Since this ideal is generally future-oriented, it is evident that it has certain eschatological applications. Unlike Jesus, the Mahdi is not mentioned in the Qur'an by name, although many verses refer to the *muhtadun*, or "the guided ones."[4] In the Arabic lexicon, *mahdi* means "the person who is guided by God to the truth."[5] Both words are derived from the same verbal noun, *hady*, which means guidance. Thus, anyone who follows the true path could theoretically be called *mahdi* but without any messianic meaning attached to the term. If we consider hopeful Qur'anic verses to be indicators of the establishment of justice in the future, then we can make a connection between this idea of hope and the Mahdi tradition in Islam.

In the development of the Islamic tradition, many questions arose regarding the persona of the Mahdi and the number of *mahdis*. One prophetic tradition uses the plural form of the term in a context that indicates that the spiritual rank of *mahdis*, or people who are guided to the truth, is quite high. One can understand this from a story narrated in the Hadith collections. When the Prophet

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prayed for one of his companions, Abu Salama, who had passed away, he said, "My Lord, bestow your forgiveness upon Abu Salama, raise his spiritual rank to the level of the *mahdis*."[6] Since the Prophet used the plural form, it is understood that he did not mean the expected messianic figure. In other instances, the Prophet used the plural form of the term for his four caliphs, or successors, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali, calling them "the *mahdis*." Collectively, the four caliphs are the highest of the members of the Islamic community in spiritual rank. Irbad bin Sariya, one of the companions of the Prophet, narrates:

> One day after morning prayer, the Prophet talked to us so eloquently that our eyes became full of tears, and our hearts became fearful of God and softened. A man in the group asked the Prophet, "O messenger of God, this is like a farewell speech. How do you advise us?" The Prophet replied, "I advise you to be fearful of God, to listen, and to obey, even if your leader is an Ethiopian slave. Surely, those of you who live longer will see much disunity. I am warning you about changes in the essence of religion. Surely, it is a corruption. If you are alive at that time, stick to my path and the path of my rightly guided successors [the *mahdis*]."[7]

Since the Prophet used the term *mahdis* for his successors, it is very possible that in the mind of most Muslims, the term *mahdi* became associated with a leader who would rule and bring justice to the world, as did 'Umar, the second caliph in Islam, who became a symbol of justice beyond the Islamic world through his practices of just rule.

One of the reasons the Mahdi is not an important element of faith in the Sunni tradition of Islam is because the belief in the Mahdi is not directly mentioned in the two main sources of the Hadith, namely those recorded by Muhammad al-Bukhari and Muslim bin al-Hajjaj. He is also not mentioned among the major signs of the Final Hour. Because of this, Sunni Muslims consider the belief in the Mahdi to be a secondary issue.

Even though it is not an essential part of Islam, belief in the Mahdi is of theological concern to some theologians. Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani (d. 1390), a prominent medieval Muslim theologian, speaks of sayings of the Prophet on the Mahdi that are not mentioned in the two major sources of Hadith. He draws a distinction between the Shi'ite and the Sunni views on the Mahdi that clearly suggests that the Mahdi issue is a part of Islamic theology. Apparently this remarkable theologian was troubled by the hadith in which the Mahdi leads the prayer when he meets Jesus at the Umayyad Mosque, perhaps because many theologians, including him, have understood the hadith in a literal way. Al-

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Taftazani seems not to understand why a prophet, Jesus, would ask a saint, the Mahdi, to lead a prayer when he would be expected to lead the prayer. Therefore, al-Taftazani reiterates that even after his descent Jesus will still remain a prophet of God and will still be higher than the Mahdi. After mentioning several hadith on the Mahdi, al-Taftazani says, "Yes, even he [Jesus] is at that time among the followers of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. Yet Jesus is not stripped of his prophethood. There is no doubt that Jesus, as a prophet of God, is higher than the Mahdi in spiritual rank. That is because the goal of scholars of the Islamic community is the imitation of the prophets of the Israelites."[8] As I shall discuss in chapter eight, al-Taftazani reports others' allegorical interpretations of certain end-time events and seems to have no problem with them. For this specific instance of prayer, however, he has no explanation. It seems that Islamic theology needed to wait until the twentieth century for an allegorical interpretation of the hadith. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, suggests that this is an indication of a Muslim-Christian alliance based on Qur'anic principles of justice and piety.

The Mahdi and the concept of justice are so intertwined that many Muslims have identified historical figures who struggled for justice and worked against oppression or who brought prosperity for their community as the Mahdi. For example, many considered 'Abdullah bin al-Zubair (d. 692), one of the companions of the Prophet, to be the Mahdi of his time. He fought against the oppression of some Umayyad dynasty leaders, particularly al-Hajjaj bin Yusuf (d. 714), who was notorious for his oppression, especially of the family of the Prophet. Many also considered the Umayyad caliphs Sulayman bin 'Abd al-Malik (r. 715–17) and 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, who is known as 'Umar II (r. 717–20), to be the Mahdi for removing all grievances and making "the crooked straight."[9] A modern Egyptian scholar considers 'Umar II to be "a remarkable renewer of Islam foretold by the Prophetic hadith 'surely God sends for this community at the beginning of every century someone who renews for the community its religion.'"[10] He cites several reasons why 'Umar II was the renewer foretold by this hadith. For example, in addition to his piety and ascetic life, 'Umar's just ruling included giving importance to consultation; rejecting oppression; returning wrongly taken property to its owners; protecting minorities, Christians, and Jews; and providing freedom of thought. 'Umar's strong religion and political engagement are also cited as indications that he was a renewer of Islam, though we do not see here a messianic connotation.[11] However, some did see a messianic connotation in giving the Abbasid caliph Muhammad, the son of al-Mansur, the title of al-Mahdi.[12]

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From an Islamic theological perspective, those who claim that they are the Mahdi are in fact charlatans. Since the Mahdi is guided by God, any claim to such a spiritual rank negates that rank because humility is an essential part of Islam.[13] Since hadith on the Mahdi assign a highly important task to this eschatological figure—the bringing of justice—the non-Hadith Islamic literary genre has depicted the Mahdi as having supernatural characteristics. The Mahdi has been given the extraordinary power to fulfill those expectations because such a task cannot be accomplished by an ordinary individual. Since this characterization is not found in the Hadith, it lacks theological value. The idea of the Mahdi, however, has affected the social and political life of Muslims and has led to the emergence of many impostors.

It should be noted that because of the similar roles of Jesus and the Mahdi, there has been confusion about the role of each. Some early scholars of Islamic theology have even claimed that there will be no Mahdi, that the eschatological figure called the Mahdi is in fact Jesus himself.[14] Although this view has not received general acceptance among Muslims, some early scholars viewed the concept of the Mahdi in this way. Al-Taftazani tackles this point by referring to a saying related to the Prophet: "there is no Mahdi except Jesus." He interprets the word *mahdi* to mean "guide" instead of the expected messianic figure of Islam. He says, "It is not illogical to interpret this saying of the Prophet to mean that there is no guide [*mahdi*] to lead the annihilation of al-Dajjal and the prevention of his evil actions, as the reliable sayings of the Prophet have indicated, except Jesus."[15]

As did Abu Dawud, some other early Hadith scholars recorded several more traditions about the Mahdi in their collections.[16] One can find a criticism by Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) about the authenticity of these sayings of the Prophet. Generally speaking, he accused many narrators of being unreliable, although one can conclude from his overall approach that he believed some sayings of the Prophet on the subject were reliable, and he affirms that the idea of the Mahdi among Muslims has been a predominant view throughout history. Interestingly, Ibn Khaldun brings the Mahdi, Jesus, and the Antichrist together and explains the sequence of their emergence. In this sequence, the Mahdi comes first, then the Antichrist, and finally Jesus. He also warned that in his time there were some charlatans who claimed they were the expected Mahdi. Summarizing the Sunni understanding of the Mahdi, Ibn Khaldun says,

> It has been well known and generally accepted by all Muslims in every epoch that at the end of time a man from the family of the Prophet will,

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> without fail, make his appearance, one who will strengthen the religion and make justice triumph. Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm. He will be called the Mahdi. Following him, the Antichrist will appear with all the subsequent signs of the Hour as established in the sound tradition of the Sahih. After the Mahdi, Isa [Jesus] will descend and kill the Antichrist. Or Jesus will descend with the Mahdi and help him kill the Antichrist, and will have the Mahdi lead the prayers.[17]

A famous hadith explicitly emphasizes the similarity between the Mahdi and the Prophet Muhammad. According to Abu Dawud, who seems to be the Hadith collector most interested in the subject of the Mahdi, the Prophet said: "If the world had no more than one day remaining, God would make that day long in order to send a man from my family, whose name will coincide with my name [Muhammad], and the name of his father will coincide with the name of my father ['Abdullah]."[18] In another narration chain of the same tradition, a similar statement is attributed to 'Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, that emphasizes the fulfillment of justice. 'Ali, referring to his son Hasan, says: "This son of mine is a master, as he was called by the Messenger of God. From his offspring, there will come forth a man who will be called by the name of the Prophet [Muhammad] and who will not resemble him physically, but will resemble him in character." 'Ali then says: "He will fill the earth with justice," the role attributed to Jesus in Hadith literature.[19] This emphasis on character goes against the common understanding of the description of the Mahdi. In most Islamic sources, he is known to have the name of Muhammad and his father has the name of Muhammad's father, 'Abdullah. Also typical are descriptions of facial features of the Mahdi, such as his nose, eyes, and ears, that contradict this emphasis on character.

If the hadith about the Mahdi were proven to be sound and reliable, the promise of the Mahdi was likely a reassuring answer and a comfort to the companions of the Prophet who were asking him about the coming turmoil. For example, the Prophet refers to a caliph who the commentators understand to be the Mahdi: "At the end of my community, there will be a caliph who will distribute countless wealth."[20] The Hadith commentators indicate that this person was believed to have been 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, or 'Umar II, the Umayyad caliph whose time was one of prosperity and peace and justice for the Islamic community. Many scholars, poets, and theologians have thought of Umar II as either a *mahdi* or the Mahdi, "whose physical peculiarities foretold that he was the one destined to fill the earth with justice."[21] The word "caliph," or *khalifa*, has

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the connotation of both religious and political authority. To indicate this, the term *khalifat Allah*, or "deputy of God," was used for the heads of state during the Umayyad dynasty.

Because the term "caliph" was used to indicate both religious and political authority, one can understand how the title of Mahdi in the Shi'ite tradition also came to mean both religious and political authority. If the Hadith commentators are accurate in their assumption that the caliph mentioned in this hadith refers to the Mahdi, then one can claim that the Sunni tradition has a parallel point of view about the position of the Mahdi.[22] Similarly, a hadith about a group keeping the path of righteousness is perceived as a reference to the community of the Mahdi that reasserts the promise of hope in the unseen future. The Prophet says: "There will always be a group of people, following the way of truth triumphantly until the Day of Judgment."[23] These traditions suggest that there is not necessarily just one Mahdi and that there may be more than one. This might explain why historically many people referred to their spiritual leaders, Sufi masters, or just rulers using the title Mahdi.

The idea of the Mahdi also has a significant place in the mystical tradition of Islam. According to Ibn Khaldun, Ibn al-'Arabi, one of the most significant personalities of Islamic mysticism, elaborated extensively on the subject.[24] Ibn al-'Arabi suggests that the idea of the Mahdi has some relationship with the idea of a *mujaddid* (renewer) in Islam. A renewer can be a saint or a scholar. The idea has its roots in a prophetic tradition. The Prophet says, "Surely God sends for this community at the beginning of every century someone who renews for the community its religion."[25] Accordingly, it is believed that although there are difficulties and tumultuous times, God will not leave the community without guidance. The Prophet gave the good news to his community that God will support the community with these selected figures, renewers who possess moral and spiritual power. Many Muslims believe that Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) was the renewer of his time and that Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) was the renewer of the second millennium of the Islamic calendar. Similarly, some consider Bediüzzaman Said Nursi to be the renewer of the twentieth century.[26] There might be others who could be considered renewers of Islam. Theologically speaking, it is not appropriate to make a strict claim in this regard. One should say that God knows best.

Discussion of the Mahdi leads to the place of hope in the Islamic tradition. All this good news from the Prophet about the future should not put out the flame of hard work in the minds and hearts of Muslims. Fatalism and hopelessness are not accepted in Islam. If the idea of the coming of the Mahdi leads to

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idleness and passivity, it would be because of a misreading of the sayings of the Prophet about future events. It can be argued that for a good period of time, this misreading of the text was the norm. The Qur'an explicitly states that "for human beings there is nothing except through their own endeavors" (53:39). Believers of Islam should combine hope and action. This is true even in difficult times. The faithful are to be hopeful about a better future. The Qur'an mentions the experiences of the prophets before Islam, those who never deviated from justice despite the difficulties they faced. The role of the Mahdi can be understood as a continuation of their belief.

Jesus

Before discussing the Antichrist in Islamic theology, it is important to elaborate on Jesus's descent as understood by Shi'ite theologians, which is very much related to the emergence of the Mahdi. Essentially, the majority of Shi'ite Muslims, the dominant religious group in modern-day Iran, are in agreement with Sunni Muslims about the descent of Jesus. Yet some Shi'ite theologians may have some different views.

According to the Twelver Shi'ite tradition, Jesus will descend at the end of time and will help establish justice on the earth. Other sects of the Shi'ite tradition are directly influenced by the teachings of Christianity in their religious beliefs. For example, they consider 'Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, to be an incarnation of God and compare Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad and wife of 'Ali, to Mary, the mother of Jesus.[27] They have also developed a religious hierarchy that suggests a Christian influence. According to the scenario that is presented here, Jesus will descend to help the Muslim community fight the Antichrist and will defeat him. We find a parallel between Sunni and Shi'ite beliefs in this regard. However, a slight difference between the two beliefs should be noted: the Shi'ite tradition suggests that although Jesus has died, he will be resurrected and return.

Some Shi'ite theologians, such as Abu Ja'far 'Ali bin Babawayh al-Qummi (d. 991), demonstrate a parallel belief not with the Sunni tradition but with Christianity with regard to the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Ibn Babawayh says, "According to what our opponents [Sunni theologians] narrate, when the Mahdi emerges, Jesus will descend on earth and pray behind him. In fact, Jesus' descent to this world is his return after his death."[28] Two later Shi'ite scholars share this idea of Ibn Babawayh. In his interpretations of the Qur'an, al-Tabarsi (d. 1153) mentions the reliability of traditions concern-

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ing the descent of Jesus and discusses different ideas about these traditions. He shares the beliefs found in the Sunni tradition that are narrated in major sources of the Hadith.[29] These Shi'ite Muslims were greatly influenced by pre-Islamic scripture. For example, a seventeenth-century Shi'ite scholar, Fayd-i Kashani (d. 1679), refers to pre-Islamic scriptural references, particularly the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels. Kashani quotes "the Gospel" on the coming of the Prophet of Islam to the people of seventh-century Arabia and speaks of Jesus as a precursor of Muhammad: "Jesus said in the Gospel the Reverence [Christ] is going and the Paraclete [Muhammad] is coming after him. He will lighten the bonds and interpret everything for you. He will witness for me as I witness for him. I came to you with parables; he will come to you with interpretation." Kashani continues by narrating a divine revelation to Jesus: "God revealed to Jesus and said, 'O Jesus, believe in Muhammad, and command your community of those who will come after Muhammad's emergence to believe in him. If it were not for Muhammad, I would not have created Adam, and if it were not for Muhammad, I would not have created Paradise and Hell."[30] Though Kashani does not give a direct indication of the source for this biblical quote and simply cites "the Gospel" as his reference, the context seems to indicate that he was referring to John 14:16, which says, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever." The word "helper" as translated here is the Greek word *paraklétos*, which is believed to be a reference to Muhammad. It is clear that Kashani is not quoting verbatim from this verse, and he likely took it from some secondary sources of his time.

Some Shi'ite scholars even go further to speak about the conditions in which Jesus lives and whether he is now alive or dead. For example, the prominent contemporary Shi'ite scholar al-Tabataba'i (d. 1981) states that Jesus is alive today. He interprets the verse of the Qur'an about the death of Jesus to mean that God is taking care of Jesus instead of meaning that Jesus died. Therefore, the meaning of the verse "and remember when God said, 'O Jesus, I will cause you to die and raise you to Myself'" (Qur'an 3:55) is "I will take care of you," rather than the literal "I will cause you to die." He also elaborates on Jesus's ascension, saying that it is not just ascension in the physical world. A purely physical ascent would assign a location to God, which is not compatible with the principles of Islamic theology. Here we face the theological problem of confining God to a particular space. In Islamic theology, God is too exalted to have a physical location. If Jesus has ascended to God, does this mean that we should relate God to a particular space?

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To respond to these challenging questions, al-Tabataba'i says, "We can say the meaning of ascension to God is the ascension of body and spirit. The apparent meaning of the verse leads to this belief. In this case, Jesus ascended to heaven in the sense that heaven meant the nearest rank to God, the place where people ascend for the glorification of God, the residence of the angels."[31] This view of heaven is shared by some contemporary Sunni theologians, as discussed earlier, and the Shi'ite belief is parallel to the Sunni belief in this regard. Among Shi'ite scholars today, the idea has remained and has kept its vitality. Some modern scholars of the Shi'ite branch of Islam compare Jesus to the Mahdi, perhaps because of the similarity of their roles in bringing justice and rescuing the oppressed.

However, Ibn Khaldun shares the reports of some narrators who give us the impression that the Shi'ite tradition of Islam denies the descent of Jesus. He criticizes some Shi'ite sects for their deification of imams, including the hidden imam, the Mahdi, in the same way that he criticizes Christians for believing in the divinity of Jesus. Ibn Khaldun says, "There are also [Shi'ite] sects that are called 'Extremists' [*ghulat*]. They transgress the bounds of reason and the faith of Islam when they speak of the divinity of the imams. They either assume that the imam is a human being with divine qualities, or they assume that he is God in human incarnation."[32]

According to Ibn Khaldun, "Some Shi'ites referred to the famous saying of the Prophet: 'There is no Mahdi except Jesus' to claim that there will be no Mahdi except the Mahdi," and some Shi'ites contend that "the Mahdi is the Messiah of the Messiahs."[33] One can argue that Jesus's descent is not denied in Shi'ite theological sources. These sources suggest that Jesus's descent supports the messianic figure of Shi'ites, the Mahdi. If Jesus's descent is acknowledged in the Shi'ite tradition, then why would a prominent Islamic historian, theologian, and sociologist such as Ibn Khaldun have claimed that Shi'ite Muslims do not have such a creed? Here we may make two speculations. First, it is possible that Ibn Khaldun was not aware of some major Shi'ite sects, which have their own creeds and beliefs. Since he lacked this information, he came to the conclusion that Shi'ites do not believe in the coming of Jesus. The second possibility is that Ibn Khaldun knew about this faith of Shi'ites but that since their argument for it was so weak, he just ignored it. Some Shi'ite sects even claimed that 'Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, would return in a manner that is similar to the coming of Jesus. Others claimed that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, would return. Sunni Muslims reject both views.

This idea of the return of 'Ali is present in the beliefs of some classical sects

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in the Shi'ite tradition, including one called the Saba'iyya, an extremist Shi'ite sect. When 'Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam and the most prominent figure in the Shi'ite tradition, died after being wounded while preparing for morning prayer by a Kharijite named Abd al-Rahman bin Muljam (d. 661), the Saba'iyya claimed that 'Ali had not been killed but that Satan had been killed instead.[34] They believed that 'Ali rose to the heavens just as Jesus did and that Ali would return and have his revenge on his enemies.[35] Some of these Shi'ite sects also "greet the clouds," since they believe that 'Ali will come riding on the clouds, a view that is almost identical to some literal readings of the return of Jesus in Christianity. The founder of the Saba'iyya, 'Abdullah bin Saba', claimed that the Prophet Muhammad will also return after his death. Members of the Saba'iyya criticized Sunnis and Shi'ites who do not believe in the return of Muhammad, claiming that "it is strange indeed that anyone should believe in the return of Jesus as the Messiah and deny the return of Muhammad." They claimed that God has announced the return of Muhammad. Reynold Nicholson refers to Julius Wellhausen's belief that the dogmas of this group were derived from Judaic roots rather than from Persian sources.[36] Although the group had an effect on Islamic history, it has not continued into our time.

Al-Dajjal, the Antichrist

The Mahdi is presented on the side of Jesus in his eschatological struggle as a figure of righteousness.[37] In this understanding, we encounter a figure of evil that is on the opposite side, known as the Antichrist, or al-Dajjal, a fierce opponent of Jesus. In Islam, al-Dajjal is evil personified, along with Satan (Qur'an 2:36, 168, 208, 268), Iblis (Qur'an 2:34; 7:11; 26:95), al-Taghut (Qur'an 2:257; 4:60; 16:36), and the Pharaoh (Qur'an 3:11; 20:60; 28:4). Hadith literature contains a detailed account of the emergence of al-Dajjal, also known as al-Masih al-Dajjal or the Liar Messiah.

Strictly speaking, the word "al-Dajjal" does not appear in the Qur'an. However, some scholars believe that he is mentioned by his character traits. The Qur'anic verses that mention Jesus indirectly make reference to al-Dajjal as well. One verse reads: "Nay, but verily man is rebellious" (96:6). Though the chapter's revelation marks it as a description of a specific historical figure from the time of the Prophet, it goes on to list characteristics that are analogous to those that have been ascribed to al-Dajjal: rebelling against divine revelation and the Prophet; preventing people from worshipping God; and closing houses of worship, in particular mosques, among others. Similar sentiments are found

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in chapter 68 verses 10–13, which say: "[Muhammad] don't follow the wretch of many oaths, the mischief-making slanderer, the hinderer of good, the wicked transgressor, and the bully who is of doubtful birth." Some argue that verses in the Qur'an about the Pharaoh and false deities such as al-Taghut also set forth characteristics of al-Dajjal.[38] As Bernard McGinn writes, "Some Qur'anic exegetes refer to Chapter 108 in the Qur'an and claim that the verse contains the hallmarks of the Antichrist." The chapter reads: "Lo! We have given you [Muhammad] the *kauthar* [the fountain of paradise, a fountain that permanently quenches the thirst of anyone who drinks of it]; so pray unto your Lord and sacrifice, surely the one who insults you, he is the *abtar* [one who is cut off without posterity]" (108:1–3). McGinn indicates that some Muslim scholars understand the term *abtar* to mean "one who is cut off or defective" and believe that this is a reference to the Antichrist.[39]

In the Hadith collections, al-Dajjal is portrayed as an ugly, dirty person with one eye. A companion of the Prophet, Anas bin Malik, narrates that on one occasion the Prophet told his companions the following: "All of the prophets warned their communities about the Antichrist. Beware, he is blind, and your Lord is not blind. And there will be written on his forehead between his eyes the word 'disbeliever' Kaf-Fa-Ra [or K-F-R, the Arabic letters for the root word for 'disbelief']." McGinn argues that the notion that the Antichrist will have three letters on his forehead parallels a number of Christian beliefs about the physiognomy of the Antichrist, especially those presented in the apocalypse narratives found in the non-canonical texts of pseudo-John and pseudo-Daniel.[40]

The companions of the Prophet asked him about the length of al-Dajjal's stay on earth. The Hadith collections record that the length of his stay is forty days. In a considerably long hadith narrated in one of the two most reliable Hadith collections, Muslim bin al-Hajjaj, the Prophet speaks of the unusual days of the Antichrist: "[He stays for] forty days. One day is as long as a year. . . . And we asked, 'O messenger of God, for the day that is like one year, does it suffice for us to pray a one day prayer?' The Prophet replied, 'No, measure [the time of your prayer] that day according to your [regular] days.'"[41]

Since the Prophet frequently uses figurative language in his talks about future events, we may understand the meaning of these prophetic statements in an allegorical and symbolic way. In the methodology of Islamic theology, when the literal meaning is not reasonable, one should refer to the allegorical and symbolic meaning. This hadith seems to be allegorical in relationship to the Antichrist since the individual this text describes cannot be a human being. It

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is scientifically implausible for anyone to be born with these letters indicating disbelief or a denial of God inscribed on his or her forehead. However, there are various symbols of disbelief, and perhaps this is what the Prophet meant instead of literal letters. Especially in our time, there are many groups or causes that can be easily recognized by their symbols. For instance, people who sport clothing with the logo of the Coexist Foundation are making a clear ideological statement of the need to understand one another and live together peacefully. Explicit disbelief in God also has its symbols. One can argue that the hammer and sickle have come to represent an atheistic worldview instead of the proletariat and the peasantry that they originally stood for. Here we do not assert that the Prophet of Islam referred in these sayings to certain ideologies of disbelief, but we can assume that the Prophet could have spoken of some future ideologies and movements that might make denial of God a slogan and a symbol.

These are, of course, all possible interpretations and are open to discussion. One cannot determine for sure what the ultimate goal of the Prophet was in making these statements and therefore cannot build a strong faith upon them. The text is open to more interpretations. All of these interpretations are based on our assumption that the Prophet really said these statements because they are mentioned in the reliable sources of Hadith. If the scholars of Hadith prove the unreliability of these sayings of the Prophet, then these interpretations point to what happened after the era of the Prophet. Theologically speaking, the knowledge of these kinds of narratives belongs solely to God because they refer to the future, to unseen events.

Some contemporary scholars have found certain hints in the sayings of the Prophet that help in understanding these ambiguous narratives. One of these hints is the concept of the "long day," according to some contemporary theologians who are much more aware of the geography of the world than earlier generations were. One of these scholars is Said Nursi, who refers to the North Pole as a reference for this hadith, a place where a year is one day. This contemporary knowledge has led him to define the location from which the Antichrist or, in his words, "the ideology of disbelief," emerges. He humbly reminds his readers that "no one knows the realm of the unseen but God" (Qur'an 27:65) to make it clear that his interpretations are not binding. To him, "there are two interpretations of this: the first, the hadith indicates that the big Dajjal (the Antichrist of the world of Christianity) will emerge from the North Pole, because at the North Pole the whole year is one night and one day." In his second interpretation, Nursi says that both Dajjals, the Antichrist

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of the Islamic world and that of the Christian world, will have three periods of rule. During the first of these, which are called "days," the two Antichrists will accomplish "endeavors" the likes of which a human being could not accomplish in three hundred years. Nursi believed this is what the Prophet of Islam meant by "one day will be like one year." He also suggests that the Antichrist should not be understood as merely a person but as a current or philosophy of irreligiosity that promotes disbelief. For him, a philosophical movement such as Communism can be considered one of these materialistic philosophies or movements.[42]

Unlike Nursi's interpretation, Muslims throughout Islamic history understood the Antichrist to be an individual rather than a movement. Yet Nursi's point shows us that there should be a reevaluation of some historical concepts of Islamic theology. There is no doubt that al-Dajjal, or the Antichrist, is one of these historical themes. His role is a destructive one, and he is purely evil. He is not capable of doing good. He is similar to the evil figure in Islam known as al-Shaytan or Satan.

According to Islamic theology, both Satan and the Antichrist are dedicated to evil. This is why the Prophet mentions refuge from both in God. In his daily prescribed prayers, he used to say the following, which is even today repeated by Muslims as part of their daily prayers: "O my Lord! I take refuge in You from the torment of the grave. I take refuge in You from the chastisement of fire. I take refuge in You from the trial of life and death, and I take refuge in You from the trial of the Antichrist."[43] Muslims are told that the Prophet taught this prayer to his companions as he was teaching them a chapter from the Qur'an.[44]

According to the Islamic tradition, the Antichrist will attack believers until Jesus comes to help them and eventually, with the Mahdi, defeats him. In some later Hadith collections, the situation of believers has been dramatized for maximum effect. According to a saying of the Prophet narrated by one of his closest companions, Abu Huraira, "no one will be able to kill the Antichrist except Jesus, the son of Mary, peace be upon him."[45] After this victory the world will be full of justice and peace. This should not be confused with the Christian understanding of the coming kingdom of God, where evil is totally eliminated. Since this worldly life is a place of testing, it is impossible to eliminate evil completely. Although it is believed that there will be a period of great justice and peace, the struggle between good and evil will continue though evil will be greatly weakened. It is the life of paradise and the realm of eternity where evil no longer exists and the "kingdom of God" is fully established.

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A Case for the Interpretive Approach

At this juncture, we need to discuss and evaluate the reliability of the sayings of the Prophet presented in this chapter. After reviewing the body of Hadith literature on the descent of Jesus, the Antichrist, and the Mahdi, one can conclude that the overall body of the Hadith includes some weak hadith attributed to the Prophet that lack a reliable chain of narration. Hadith authorities have elaborated on those unreliable references one by one. Most likely these weak hadith were wrongly attributed to the Prophet.

Having said this, a good number of hadith on the subject are accepted as reliable and sound. Understanding these sayings of the Prophet in an allegorical way is more compatible with the overall principles of Islamic theology. However, many medieval and modern Islamic scholars have understood these dogmas literally. They rely on a theological principle that avoids allegorical meanings if a literal meaning is possible. In the case of the hadith related to the descent of Jesus, the literalist approach finds the actual descent of Jesus from heaven possible because it is believed to be within God's power to bring Jesus physically from heaven. Because of this possibility, they accept the literal meaning of the text and avoid interpretation.

In contrast to the literalist approach, the contemporary interpretative approach suggests that through his actions in the physical realm, God has shown certain patterns that might be understood by humans. He changes these patterns when it is necessary, though this happens only rarely, such as when he allows prophets to perform miracles. The contemporary interpretative approach, which I argue for, does not see the descent of Jesus as a miracle. The defenders of this approach argue that God is omnipotent, that with God everything is possible. However, God's pattern of action in the physical world teaches us that things happen through the interaction of cause and effect. To expect a person to come in bodily form from the sky, in front of everyone's eyes, and to expect this person to rescue people from oppression and establish justice does not seem plausible, nor does it seem to be in accordance with the divine wisdom or the principles of Islamic theology. God is essentially the "Cause of causes," and no cause can have an effect without the will of God.

Because God's actions in this world are veiled by natural causes, it seems that the hadith containing extraordinary descriptions of future events, including Jesus's descent, the emergence of the Antichrist, and the emergence of the Mahdi, should all be taken in an allegorical way. In this interpretation, God can restore a society with one person in a twinkling of an eye, but even a success such as

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this was not accomplished by the greatest prophets of God. Therefore, is the Mahdi greater than the Prophet of Islam? All Muslim theologians will answer this question with "No"; why then would the Mahdi be able to restore his society so miraculously when even the Prophet was unable to do this? Therefore, those sayings of the Prophet for which reliability is proven by Hadith authorities can be interpreted in accordance with the Arabic language and the literature of allegory.[46] For example, in Arabic metaphor, when one says, "This person has a long sword," it means that he is a tall man. If he is tall and has no long sword, the statement is still correct. But if he is not tall, even if he has a long sword, the statement is incorrect because the literal meaning is not intended in the phrase. Therefore many hadith on the subject should be understood allegorically. The following hadith by 'A'isha, the wife of the Prophet, which al-Bukhari reported, constitutes a good example of how the Prophet used metaphorical language in his conversations with his companions and the people of his house. After being asked who would be the first to meet him in the afterlife, He said, "The one who has the longest hand." By saying this, the Prophet meant the one who has the longest hand outstretched in charity has the longest hand, not the one with the longest physical hand.[47]

This hadith clearly illustrates that the Prophet used allegorical language in his conversations with his companions and even more so for future events. As in other traditions, particularly in Judaism, there are two tendencies about eschatological events: the restorative-conservative approach and the apocalyptic-utopian approach.[48] In the Islamic tradition one can find similar types of approaches. In the following chapter I will elaborate on what I call the literalist approach.

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